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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: NAZEM KHOURY PLUGS FOR A SLEIMAN
PRESIDENCY

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Former MP Nazem Khoury spoke glowingly of the Lebanese Armed Forces's (LAF) achievement at Nahr al-Barid and of LAF commander General Michel Sleiman's heroic role in the victory. Khoury discounted doubts about Sleiman's political allegiance; he was a man one could judge by his actions. Furthermore, Sleiman's high estimation among the people did not enhance, but rather complicated his standing with the politicians, including the pro-Syrians. For Khoury, Sleiman, in his capacity as armed forces commander, represents Lebanese institutions and is one of only a few who can protect them.

2. (C) Khoury further stressed that only a consensus candidate such as Sleiman would be capable of ruling the country, given that both March 14 and the opposition would never recognize a president elected by the other side. Even anti-opposition diehards, such as Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, would eventually come round to seeing the wisdom of a Sleiman presidency. Others, Lebanese Forces (LF) leader Samir Geagea included, would be harder to convince. End summary.

POPULARITY COMPLICATED BY POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

3. (C) In a September 5 meeting with the Ambassador and Poloff, former independent MP (and close friend and relative of LAF Commander General Michel Sleiman) Nazem Khoury presented Sleiman as the one person both March 14 and the opposition could agree on as a consensus presidential candidate. He was particularly impressed by the media coverage Sleiman orchestrated of the Nahr al-Barid triumph, since it portrayed it as the result of teamwork, rather than the achievement of an individual. In reference to the public rejoicing over the Army's victory at Nahr al-Barid and Sleiman's popularity, Khoury suggested this did not sit well with politicians such as Lebanese Forces (LF) leader Samir Geagea and Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader Michel Aoun, who would come to regard Sleiman as their chief adversary.

4. (C) Even President Emile Lahoud's recently announced initiative to have Sleiman head an interim government actually damaged Sleiman by making him the target of the politicians. Furthermore, Sleiman himself does not trust

Lahoud, but does respect the office of the presidency. Khoury dismissed Sleiman's inopportune post-Nahr al-Barid remarks about keeping the LAF's weapons directed towards Israel, saying they were meant to play to public sentiment. Sleiman was a man you could judge by his acts; his performance is straightforward and effective. Khoury stressed that he was not a spokesman for Sleiman, but for his country; his faith in Sleiman rested on his belief in institutions.

THE ETERNAL DILEMMA:
FINDING A CANDIDATE ACCEPTABLE TO ALL

15. (C) Khoury presented three possible courses of action with regard to the presidency: First, March 14 could elect a president with only an absolute majority, but would he be able to govern? (According to Khoury, March 14 favorite Nassib Lahoud would be a victim of this circumstance.) Second, March 8 could elect a president, but he would remain unrecognized by March 14. The third and only viable solution lay in electing someone perhaps not wanted by all parties, but accepted by all. According to Khoury, Sleiman fits the bill, given his proven record, his strong public support, and his insitutional background.

16. (C) Khoury predicted that Future Movement leader Saad Hariri, and even Druze leader Walid Jumblatt would eventually accept Sleiman, despite their opposition to amending the constitution, which would be required for Sleiman to become president. Jumblatt, in particular, was intent on protecting the interests of his Druze constituency, and for that the backing of a strong national government was needed. Maronite heavyweight Samir Geagea, in Khoury's view, was very anti-Sleiman and less likely to accept. On the other hand, Maronite Patriarch Sfeir's view was more important than

BEIRUT 00001361 002 OF 002

Geagea's, and Sfeir no longer strongly opposed a Sleiman candidacy. Khoury discounted the possibility of Aoun and Geagea joining forces against Sleiman.
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